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## ABSTRACT

In seeking effective learning outcomes for all students, Australian schools must recognize that the family life is the prime determinant of attitudes toward school and learning. The greater the fit between the culture and learning patterns of home and school, the greater the likelihood of successful learning for students, irrespective of their background. Schools must seek a partnership with parents. Full parent participation is having an equal say with other parents and teachers on behalf of their children. Values are often in conflict where cultural influences are pervasive and fresh. Recognizing the values in the curriculum, gaining respect for differing values, and resolving conflict are functions of schooling that require parental input. Without parental input, the school becomes the arbiter of something it is not competent to arbitrate. Ethnic parents realize that education is of central importance to their children's success, but are often unaware of their right to participate in school decisions or reticent about expressing their ideas. Barriers to participation by immigrant parents include: (1) language difficulties; (2) a lack of knowledge or understanding of current political and educational philosophies dominant in schooling, of the organization and operation of the school system, and of the educational decision making process; (3) pedagogic and cultural inconsistencies between parents' own schooling and social experiences and those they find in Australia; and (4) teacher attitudes. Group efforts by ethnic minority parents are necessary to bring about policy changes at the local, state, or federal level. 14 references. (SV)

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National Advisory and Co-ordinating  
Committee on Multicultural Education

NACCME COMMISSIONED RESEARCH PAPER NO 7

Ethnic Parents and Australian Schools

by  
David Pettit

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ETHNIC PARENTS IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS

BY

DAVID PETTIT

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# NATIONAL ADVISORY AND CO-ORDINATING COMMITTEE ON MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

## PREFACE

The National Advisory and Co-ordinating Committee on Multicultural Education (NACCME) was established by the Minister for Education (and Youth Affairs), Senator Susan Ryan, on 27 March 1984, following from the Government's acceptance of Recommendation 29 of the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs Evaluation of Post-Arrival Programs and Services to Migrants (May 1985).

NACCME's Terms of Reference are to:

- (i) advise the Minister for Education on matters relating to multicultural education;
- (ii) co-ordinate, monitor and review multicultural programs and activities;
- (iii) determine an appropriate procedure for information exchange and put that procedure into practice.

NACCME's main function is to provide advice on the needs of multicultural education across a broad spectrum, from pre-school to higher education and information education mechanisms such as the media. The Commonwealth Department of Education provides the Secretariat for the Committee.

At its inaugural meeting, Senator Ryan suggested that the Committee develop a major policy document on multicultural education, and this was taken up as a major task for NACCME over the past three years. On 26 May 1987 NACCME's policy document Education In and For a Multicultural Society: Issues and Strategies for Policy Making was officially launched.

In developing this major policy document NACCME sought input from outside experts by commissioning a number of background research papers.

NACCME is pleased to now release a series of seven papers comprising eight commissioned research papers which had direct input into our own document.

We hope that these papers will add to the pool of information available on, and constructive discussion of, issues in multicultural education.

The views expressed in these papers are not necessarily those of NACCME itself.

This paper entitled Ethnic Parents and Australian Schools is by David Pettit, formerly the Director of Studies South Central Regional Office, Victorian Department of Education. Mr Pettit currently works in the Policy Co-ordination Unit of the Victorian Ministry of Education.

This is the seventh paper in the NACCME Commissioned Research Papers Series.

NACCME asked Mr Pettit to prepare a paper on community involvement and participation in multicultural education. The terms of reference were to canvass the issues relating to the involvement of the community in education, with particular emphasis on

- (i) the participation of the people from a non English speaking background
- (ii) education in and for a multicultural society.

The paper was completed for NACCME in 1987.

## ETHNIC PARENTS AND AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS

### RATIONALE

"Class, race and sex are constant and powerful determinants that structure the perspective from which individuals discern the meaning of any information." (ACSSO - 1985)

Schools and education systems exist so that young people may learn. Learning can only take place in the child. The school alone is unable to determine whether or not a child is successful in learning. It is able, by working with others, to provide opportunities that are more or less appropriate. By far the most important force outside the school is the family.

"If successful learning is to occur, then the entry point to the learning process is the known world that the child brings with him/her to the school."  
(ACSSO)

Eric Midwinter has stated that it is largely the family that educates and the school has to fit in where it can. The greater the congruence or 'fit' between the culture and learning patterns of the home and the school, the greater the likelihood of successful learning for young people irrespective of their ethnic background, colour or creed.

The rationale for community, especially parent and student, participation in schooling is the same irrespective of family background. It is that young people have the right of access to a range of appropriate learning experiences and to be successful in them. Parents have the natural right to full participation in all systems of publicly financed schooling, to express their beliefs and to direct, with others, the learning experiences of their children. To be relevant and effective that experience has to acknowledge both the importance of their aspirations and their home cultures, and the influence of the dominant Anglo-celtic culture.

There are also important lessons for parents who participate in schools about how democracy works and the role that exists for everyone, including some who may have previously considered themselves ineffectual in the public arena.

"....it is the right of all people to participate in regulating the society in which they live.

....policies that are developed through a participatory process are more likely to be better policies and to be accepted, than those that are developed in isolation from the people to whom they will apply."

(ACSSO)

#### PARTICIPATION

"Where once we talked of the school educating and everyone else - the family, the community at large - getting into the act where they could, we must now think and act on the basis of the formula that it is the community at large, and critically the family, that educates, and it is the school which fits in, where it can." (Midwinter)

Australian schools should be seeking success for students, irrespective of wealth and background. To do so would mean that they would have to be responsive to the basic understanding that it is the family that is the prime, dominant determinant of attitudes to schooling and experience.

To be effective the school has to fit in with but not be subservient to children's backgrounds. Schools should be seeking a partnership with parents for effective learning outcomes for all young people. (Min.Paper #6 Vic)

"The school ignores the relationship between family functioning and educational attainment at its peril. The function of the family is such as to dictate very largely the way in which the child performs at school. This is whether the teachers like it or not. It is not a question of some teachers being enthusiastic about home - school relations or of seeing a social base for this kind of work, nor is it merely a matter of defending parental rights on democratic or moral grounds. One must promote the view that this is a crucial professional concern.

To put it negatively, the school which refuses to take the family component into critical consideration in its day to day work is acting in a non-professional manner. The teacher who fails to do this is turning his or her back on what is now a well-rehearsed fact concerning the manner in which the learning process takes place."  
(Midwinter)

Full participation for parents - as against tokenism or partial/paternalistic participation (Pateman) - is having an equal say with other parents and teachers at the school and at other levels in the education system on behalf of their children. The cutting edge in all instances is "who controls the process"?

Participation is not to be confused with a parental group having total direction of schools but should be seen as the working through with others of agreed values, attitudes and experiences that improve the likelihood of better educational outcomes for young people.

There are two major tensions in a collective approach and the attendant processes.

Values are often not easily agreed where cultural influences are pervasive and fresh: for example the clash of values between those of the Judaeo - Christian background can be seen to be fundamentally and profoundly at odds with those from a Moslem background. Values do clash in the classroom and the yard. Recognising the values in the curriculum, gaining respect for differing values, without being value - free, and resolving clashes is a function of schooling that requires parental input. Without parent input the school becomes the arbiter of something which it does not have the competence to arbitrate. Working with parents will, however, stretch the school's capacity to create avenues for resolution.

Further it has to be accepted that participation will not always be about consensus, that conflict has to precede an acceptable form of schooling. The reality is that ideological differences exist in democracies world-wide and that conflict is acceptable where it permits a perspective of different opinions being expressed naturally, not antagonistically. The lack of confidence of ethnic parents individually involved in such communication is another pointer to the need for collective action.

Not all parents accept the ideology of participation through group action with its implied compromise. Many seek individual meritocratic approaches within the state system or by buying into the schools that represent the educational power bases within Australian society. Others opt for one of the newly created ethnic schools, either to maintain the home culture unmolested in a static or 'frozen' form or to meet more effectively the educational requirements of the dominant culture.

While many ethnic parents are involved in their children's schooling, few participate in the sense of having a share with other parents and teachers in the direction of their schools within Government policy guidelines. In most cases it has never occurred to them. Or if it has, they don't know how to. Such statements beg the question of the cultural and socio-economic differences within individual ethnic groups and between them and the special difficulties referred to earlier of language and information. Once again it has to be affirmed that ways in which participation occurs have to respect these problems and the reticence or fear of parents to express ideas: this is not the same as saying that parents do not have useful ideas.

Despite the central role schooling plays in their aspirations, ethnic parents are in a relationship to schooling common to almost all low income Australians.

When the present generation's children have children the position will have been changed by their different and changing experiences. This serves to emphasise that the divisions in Australian society are essentially class and socio-economic rather than ethnic in nature.

It also highlights the misassumption of collectively referring to and making pronouncements about 'immigrant' or 'ethnic' groups which share with the anglo-celtic majority great differentiations between and within themselves in education, experience and aspiration.

Parent participation is essentially about power, power for parents to have a say in deciding what are to be valued experiences for children from all backgrounds growing up in Australian society, Australian and overseas - born alike. It is about parents creating models for young people of efficacious adulthood, as teachers and supporters for successful outcomes.

#### PARENTAL ROLE

"Parents can no longer be viewed simply as fundraisers, helpers and the source of information about particular children but rather they must be seen as partners, for their collective knowledge provides the access teachers must have to those uncodified cultural frameworks that impinge so much on learning."  
(ACSSO)

There are three roles for parents in schools; as learners, as supporters and as change-agents.

To be effective partners with teachers, parents need to know how schooling is organised and controlled, what is taught, how it is taught and why it is taught the way it is.

Without that knowledge they cannot fully fulfill their second role as supporters of the schools' activities in a general sense. There is evidence to indicate that ethnic parents can and do bring about measurable changes in their children's learning. (Tizzard)

The third role is as school change-agents, assisting schools to remain relevant forces in society, challenging curricula that are unrewarding in content, and bringing about enhanced personal capacities and self esteem in young people: in short working to make schooling congruent and meaningful.

Parents, and ethnic parents in particular have to educate members of the dominant culture to alternative beliefs and different frameworks of knowledge that schools have to recognise to be successful.

When the conditions exist that satisfy parental rights to participate with others the conditions are also met in which students are more likely to become powerful agents for influencing the culture and their own life chances.

"All children irrespective of race, class or sex should, as a result of schooling, have independent access to knowledge and have the skills and understandings necessary to shape their own lives and to participate in shaping the society of which they are a part."  
(ACSSO)

There are powerful barriers facing parents of non-Australian backgrounds who may wish to participate, especially those with limited command of English.

They experience them in common with many other Australians, and especially the poor, but they are exacerbated by language and cultural differences. These will be discussed later.

#### ETHNIC PARENTS' EXPERIENCES

There is no commonly held view amongst people who did not go to school in Australia, one also shared with other Australians, about how or whether parents should participate. This is a cultural statement in itself. What migrants do share is their extremely high aspirations for their children and for these education is central.

Take George Kyprianou. Economic opportunities induced him and some of his friends and relations to migrate to Australia. George talks constantly of his children. His eldest is in first year Law at Melbourne University, his second at a prestigious Melbourne select entry boys school and his third is at a local primary school. His eldest son, Con, did extremely well in the year 12 exams last year. Con had gone back to Greece for the summer. George's wife had to ring up the school to find out how good the marks were. When they found out they bought back all their friends from their holidays and held a party attended by sixty people that went on for two days.

To George the symbolism of his son on the way out of the poorly paid sector of the workforce is that of an ambition realised. It is one he shares with his friends. This year he has eleven nieces and nephews leaving school. Half - all boys - are at independent schools with good track records of access to tertiary education. The cost of education has taxed their parents' resources severely but is considered a quite reasonable investment.

George works for the school's Greek parents' club which raises money to buy equipment and improve the buildings. It is separate from the Parents' Club and the School Council "because the Greeks wanted to be together and speak their language. But," as he continued "the parents today are not interested in the Parents' Club, even the Greek ones".

To George, schooling is getting on top of the system: being top means getting access to what he sees, in his job as a cab-driver, others have. To him education is competition.

George is both the rule and the exception of the differentiated world of the ethnic parent facing Australian schools. He shares with them some of the lowest paid places in the Australian labour market, their ability to work assiduously to improve their material lot and their huge ambition to catapult their children out of their own socio-economic ranks. Schooling is, in its essence, instrumental. If it also includes elements of the home culture, especially the home language, it is a strong plus, but not to be confused with the basic aim to acquire the capital assets and trappings of the dominant culture. The other cultural characteristics will be maintained within the extended family, the Saturday morning ethnic school, ethnic organisations, religious groups and marriage patterns.

As a parent he shares the suppliant role of most ethnic parents towards the school. There is a vague awareness that the pressure of other parents has led to the introduction of some languages but has little idea and little desire to know how the system works. His approach is essentially meritocratic. He is realistic enough to acknowledge the fight that his next two younger children will have to break the odds that he wryly acknowledges are stacked against him.

In that he is right. In the past children from families in which English is not the first language have in common with Aborigines, poor and transients, a lack of success in Australian schooling (Fitzgerald, Marjoribanks, Schools Commission - 1975).

The basic question this poses is whether there is something fundamentally wrong with young people of ethnic background that makes them genetically unable to benefit from the education system or whether there is something fundamentally wrong with the approach of the education system to educating migrant children.

In short, is it that the children are disadvantaged or is it that the system is loaded against them and therefore disadvantaging? Nothing short of hereditary determinism makes the first position tenable. The question then arises about why the school system is disadvantaging.

The Australian education system is a facet of the dominant anglo-celtic culture which is itself inherently part of the economic, political and social power structures of Australian Society (Rivzi 1985). This is more transparently obvious in some states and in some school systems than in others.

As a direct and indirect consequence most of the experiences of those outside the dominant culture have been considered either irrelevant as a basis for schooling or of exotic or peripheral interest (Tsolidis). Predominantly this includes the experience of parents and students from ethnic families and those from poor backgrounds.

Despite the important exemplary symbolism of George's experience it would be easy to create a misleading caricature by using it on its own. Others' experiences are different.

Vuong Nguyen, for example, was a senior tutor in sciences at Saigon University and arrived in Australia with his family via a Malaysian staging camp.

His emphasis is not on the material gains, but on the opportunities he believes Australia offers his children for a productive role in society and equal treatment with other Australians. He has no unreal expectations of his children, no carping ambitions.

He has a realistic idea of their abilities, a good understanding of Australian schooling and a concern about the schooling his children receive. He cannot afford to buy schooling: the local high and primary schools are key elements in his children's futures.

Unlike George he is concerned that Australian teachers, aware of his academic background, may have high and un-realisable expectations of his children. This view could be reinforced by his frequent appearance at parents nights and working bees. For him, working with and encouraging his children at home is the prime focus. He is involved, not participating.

Few ethnic parents share the apparently successful experience of George. Others are extremely critical. Ibrahim Mahmoud brought his family here from Lebanon. He is frankly shocked by the Australian high school his son is in. He complains of the lack of respect by the students, their unruly behaviour and the way his son has lost respect for him since he went to school here.

More than anything else he feels totally impotent, unable to change it. He is critical of the lack of arabic language in the school. At year 10 Ibrahim was thunderstruck to be told that his son could not take the year 12 exams because of his poor progress. His reports appeared to indicate that he was doing well. Ibrahim had rarely visited the school because of the hours he worked and because his wife was also working. His son stayed at school another year and is now working in his milk bar.

He and his wife were so concerned about their daughter getting caught up with Australian girls and expecting to lead a similar lifestyle, that they took her out of school at 15. She spends most of the time at home, helping with her mother's garment piecework.

#### BARRIERS

Ideally with full parent and community input it is possible for schools to be sympathetic to the values and aspirations of their "communities".

In practice the language barrier faced by migrant parents makes it particularly difficult for them (i) to transfer their opinions into their children's schools and into the schooling system in general though, for example, state and national level school organisations and (ii) to work and lobby with others to bring pressure to bear upon a school for change. At work they are often also insulated by language from all except their own kindred: often both parents work long hours for security. A second difficulty is the lack of knowledge of and therefore understanding of the current political and educational philosophies dominant in schooling, of the ways that schools operate, how the system is organised and how and what is taught in schools is determined (Turney). When they do get work normally it demands little directional or organisational skills that might be translatable in an approach towards schools.

This is not a uniquely migrant experience but one exacerbated by the language barrier. A third feature is the pedagogic and cultural inconsistencies between their own schooling and social experiences and those they find in Australia such as Ibrahim experienced.

"An essential factor in all the successful schemes of community education and parental involvement, not only in this country but elsewhere, has been the ability of the teacher to adapt fluently to the cultural norms of the host families."

(Midwinter)

Teachers predominantly live in and are of the dominant culture. Where teachers do come from migrant backgrounds they see the school system and their role as teachers as a step upwards and out of the lower socio-economic ranks (Lightfoot). Their parents normally share this view.

A further problem lies in ethnic and Australian teachers' perceptions of their professional status. This is based upon an extended education that sets them aside from most poor and ethnic people experientially, economically and socially.

For these reasons it is highly unlikely that teachers will initiate moves towards formal or informal participation by ethnic or other parents. It reinforces the need for collective action that may or may not involve conflict, a point taken up below.

This perception allied with the difficulties of communication enhances the likelihood of misunderstanding and is supported by the organisational structures and procedures of the education system itself.

The children are caught between two worlds. They are aware of the rewards associated with the dominant culture but are conscious of the lack of congruence between that world and the one in which they live and receive daily comfort, support and encouragement.

Some, uneasy in both, create the differentiated third world of the particularly ethnic youth culture.

"A parent acting in a private capacity as the parent of a particular child, has only the authority to act on behalf of that child. Parents through an ongoing process of discussion and negotiation, distill from their collective knowledge a set of common understandings and principals which form the basis for a range of education policies at the local, state and national levels." (ACCSO)

On occasions immigrants have displayed dissatisfaction with their economic disadvantage in the Australian economy (e.g. the Broadmeadows dispute in 1973). Participation in schooling offers ethnic parents the opportunity to replace with a positive direction their more commonplace dissatisfaction with Australian schooling (e.g. that recorded in Hannan & Spinosa, Turney, Tsolidis etc.). Participation is a reformist rather than a reactive approach to schooling. It acknowledges also the need to assiduously reject formal co-option.

The prime focus for group activity is towards curricular reform and more effective outcomes. The bottom line is visible change and measurable improvement in learning outcomes (Hannan and Spinosa). If this does not happen there are many indications that ethnic parents with their high aspirations and expectations have an acute capacity to by-pass schools individually and systems as a whole. The former is unlikely to lead to school reform and the latter - expressed through the rise of full-time ethnic schools - has particular problems for social cohesiveness and national identity.

There are clearly problems of process and attitude to be overcome in order to successfully achieve school responsiveness. As has been indicated above they lie in parent and teacher attitudes, parental life patterns and experience and consequently of control.

But many of the resources and the decision making vital to a parental role in school direction are not locally controllable. While in some states and systems schools may have the power to fine tune the curriculum, central resource control can cause issues to be unresolvable locally.

It may prove counter-productive to put issues to ethnic minority parents for their views when the schools or the system are basically not in a position to respond or do not accept the validity of the parent view (Hannan & Spinoso). Examples of the former are where policy may favour bi-lingual programs and community languages but the resources are inadequate to meet demand. In the latter case are demands for religious education and single sex schooling. Parents have to know the practical limits to policies and policy limits to practice.

If parents are to be put in a position to shape up the local school's policy with others there have to be legislative changes to the various Education Acts as well as appropriate local strategies. While particular strategies are required that reflect the particular needs of ethnic minority parents, much of the change required at governmental level may not have a particular multicultural flavour per se but simply needs to be inclusive of multicultural aspirations.

#### THE FOCUS

Parents are primarily and quite reasonably concerned about the success or effectiveness of their own children's schooling rather than the school as a whole. Therefore their initial concern and the prime focus of their involvement and participation will be on matters that could influence their children's success.

The initial focus is individually with those in the school who as teachers and administrators directly influence the nature of the school experience. Parents without economic or social power acting individually have a suppliant role in schools. As ethnic parents they are, like George, dependent upon their child's inherent adaptability to a culture with its many 'foreign' features - values and attitudes as well as knowledge - that are hurdles to successful school achievement. The more recent their arrival, the greater the cultural and linguistic gap, the more substantial the hurdle.

By working together parents are in a far stronger position to act as change-agents in schools to bring about a more fundamentally multicultural approach to schooling. This concept of multiculturalism is far stronger where it is inclusive of all parents who have in common the migrant experience and a sense of foreignness in Australia.

Finally it is commonly agreed that decisions are likely to be more appropriate and effective if debated with those affected.

#### STRATEGIES

"It is essential that parents, teachers and students participate as partners in a common search for new ways to make learning possible for all" (ACSSO)

Strategies for participation by ethnic minority parents have focussed and continue to need to focus on two basic areas, central policy and local practice.

It is necessary to get policies into the statute books and into regulations that support the full participation of all parents and to get the resources allocated on a regular basis that enable policies to become widely known and turned into practice.

Resources are necessary to develop collaborative or participative practice and strategy determination.

#### CENTRAL STRATEGY

State or federal policy changes are unlikely to be achieved and maintained without ethnic community organisations maintaining pressure on the respective governments. While ethnic communities might hope that benign governments would legislate favourably without 'advice', there is no evidence that they do.

Policy changes that the ethnic community must continue to pursue are:

- (i) resource allocation to support (a) multicultural approaches to schooling and (b) the full participation of the ethnic minority parents and the ethnic community in schooling.
- (ii) changes in the organisation of schooling systems to develop school level structures for formal participation (e.g. South Australian and Victorian School Councils, A.C.T. and Catholic School Boards) as an avenue for decision making; and inclusive approaches to ethnic parent representation within or separate to existing parent and school council organisations and on formal bodies (e.g. on State Board and Regional Boards in Victoria).
- (iii) inclusive, i.e. multicultural curriculum policies that support participative approaches and tangible expression of the policies and the promotion of both. As part of this it would be positive to promote similar expectations of Education Departments and Ministries as exist and are responded to by the Federal Schools Commission and State Community Welfare and Ethnic Affairs Departments, where regular consultations take place between ethnic organisation and senior administrators. Direct contact with the ethnic press/media is another extremely valuable avenue for communication.

- (iv) concurrent translation of major federal and state policy documents as the norm, rather than the exception.
- (v) changes to teacher education to enable teachers to work positively within a multicultural framework with parents who did not go to school in Australia and have trouble with English; this requires a role concept of professional expertise with a collective, rather than an individualistic, emphasis.

SCHOOL LEVEL STRATEGY has to be based on the realisation that participation can only be effective where participants have the information that gives them the competence and the confidence for the task in hand. Reluctance to take part or experiment in participation stems from lack of experience of participating in a different culture and in a foreign form of school organisation rather than lack of interest.

School level strategy also needs to recognise the importance of ethnic organisations in working with parents outside the school and outside the control of the education system and hence less likely to be co-opted into the ways of the dominant culture that schools have traditionally represented.(Saris)

Strategies, therefore, should focus on building up the information base about the curriculum, organisation and procedures of Australian schooling both inside and outside the school. Parents have to be brought into schools informally and, with the help of the appropriate interpreter services, put directly in touch with other parents and teachers in ways that are respectful of and value cultural differences as a basis for living in a multicultural Australia.

Similar strategies are required in adult language classes in Language Centres to get new arrivals used to the participative concept in adult language classes in preparation for similar expectations about their children's schooling. These are strategies likely to lead to increased formal participation through, for example, school councils and parents' bodies where these can affect school actions and outcomes. The parent and council organisations should be made more aware of the particular need to support ethnic minority parents.

Such strategies require school based, locally selected personnel supported by local and/or state ethnic organisations in order to build up parental confidence and competence and to bring teachers face-to-face with the circumstances that limit their effectiveness as teachers.

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